

# Long lost relatives meet

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**MOSS POINT** — Tears streamed down the face of Latonia Dunbar as she described the joy of finding the family she never knew existed.

Latonia Dunbar and Ja'ponica Dunbar, of Baton Rouge, La., traveled to Moss Point Friday to meet their relatives, J.R. and Ruth Spillers and Norma Dunbar Babcock, for the first time.

It was Ruth Spillers, an avid genealogist, who was instrumental in making the connection between the two families. It was a search that began when her husband J.R. wanted to have a family reunion, but could only come up with the names of 60 people to invite.

"I told him there had to be more people than that in his family, but he didn't know who they were," Spillers said. "I started doing research and now we have 6,000 people on the family tree and it's still growing."

Spillers has compiled notebook after notebook of family information that encompasses the families of Whitley-Collins, Matthews-King, Dunbar-Woods and Swift-Wright, tracing back nine generations.

Spillers said sometimes it has been slow going since no records were kept on blacks before 1870.

"I've had to do things the old-fashioned way, relying on oral history, slave records, going to graveyards, courthouses and different kinds of paperwork. I've been to the Mormon Library in Salt Lake City three times. Sometimes you hit a brick wall, but you can't give up. You have to keep going," she said.

The last link with the Dunbar side of the family ended in 1919 when J.R. Spillers' great-great grandfather died in Woodville, Miss.

When Spillers started planning the reunion, she sent letters and postcards out all across the country including Baton Rouge, La., where it just happened to land in the hands of Latonia's father.

"He came home one day and said 'I just found your family,'" Latonia said. "It's a blessing to have identified with my family. I didn't know I had anyone else except for my father, brother, grandfather, uncle and his son. That's all I knew. I never knew I had this many relatives."

Latonia immediately called the name on the postcard, making the connection with Spillers. Since that time, Latonia has been to the library doing research of her own and talking



Staff Photos/William Colgin



**TOP:** From left, Norma Dunbar, Latonia Dunbar, Ja'ponica Dunbar and J.R. Spillers look over family records during a meeting of all four relatives for the first time.

**LEFT:** Latonia Dunbar becomes emotional after meeting relatives for the first time.

have even found Dunbars on a census with African connections I didn't even know we had, so now I have started a whole new thread of research in Ghana."

Spillers, who has done genealogy work for black and white families for the past eight years, has also uncovered some unique traits in the family including multiple births.

"I counted 43 sets of twins until I just plain got tired of counting," Spillers said. "We also have three to four sets of triplets and many men and women in the family are very tall."

Latonia said she is looking forward to meeting relatives at the family reunion in July. Reunions are a wonderful way of getting everyone together, Spillers said.

"In the meantime, I've still got a lot of work to do on finding all these other family connections that are still unsolved."

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with Spillers on a daily basis.

"Latonia was going to come for the family reunion we are planning in July," said Spillers. "But she was so excited, she wanted to come during the holidays, so I told her to come on."

But Latonia didn't come alone.

Not only did Latonia find out about all of her relatives, but because of Spillers, she learned one of her closest friends, Ja'ponica Dunbar, was also her third cousin.

"We have been friends for five years and one day we were talking and found out that we each had the same maiden name," Ja'ponica said. "We found out both our families came from Wilkerson County, Miss."

Although Latonia believed the information she received from Spillers was indeed correct, Ja'ponica was still not convinced until she arrived at Spillers home to find a copy of her grandfather's funeral program.

gram.

"Now I believe," Ja'ponica said.

The two women not only met the Spillers, but Norma Dunbar Babcock, formerly of Jonesville, La., who now lives in Moss Point. She is a third cousin to J.R. Spillers, and Ruth Spillers is working hard to find the connection between the two women and Babcock.

But for Spillers that's the exciting part.

"It's like a mystery you are trying to solve," she said. "Tracing your family is so much fun. It's exciting and you find out so many amazing things about families. I love it."

So much in fact that Spillers said librarians have offered to put a bed in the public library for her. Spillers often spends every waking hour at the library doing research.

"These women brought information with them that are making even more connections for our family," Spillers said. "I

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